

Environment for Catholic Worship

Part 12

What Does a Church Look Like?

Parish communities about to renovate or build a church struggle with the question—what should it look like. In the first article in this series we discovered that the word “church” refers first, to a people—a community of faith united with Christ as its head. The building we often speak of as “the church” is the particular home of the Christian community, the place where households of faith come to remember and celebrate the covenants between God and our forebears in faith.

Just as our homes are places where significant moments of family life are remembered and celebrated, the church building is the place where we gather in response to Christ’s invitation to join in the praise and thanks of God, our creator and source of life.

There, we are bathed and anointed in baptism. There we are fed the bread of life and the cup of salvation. There, we are reconciled with God and the community. There, with the Church as witness, we pledge ourselves in lifelong commitments. And it is there that we recall the promise of eternal life given at our baptism even as we are given back to God in death.

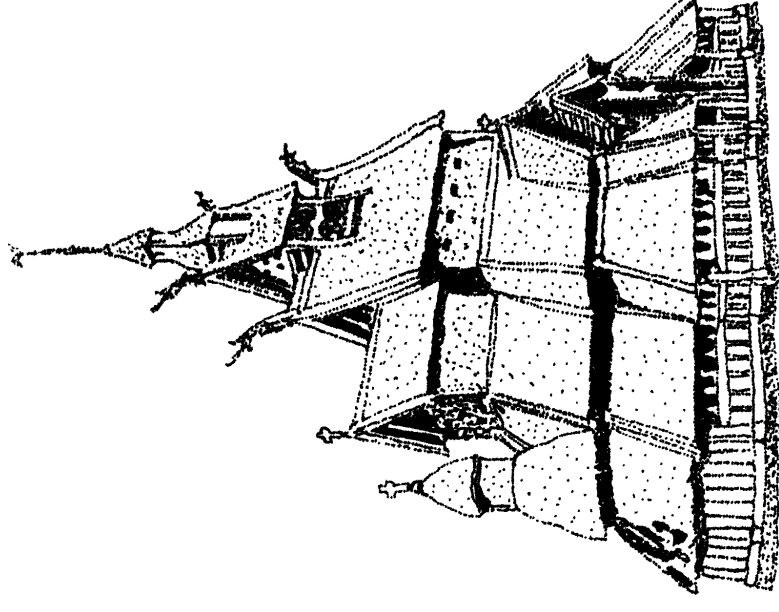
Just as our homes differ widely according to climate, age, culture, wealth and size, so too do Christian churches exhibit a variety of styles. In fact, it has always been the

case throughout the life of the church. The Catholic tradition has been truly catholic, that is, universal. From the first houses that were converted to use as a place of worship in the second and third century to the modern era, the design of places of worship has evolved in wide-ranging variety of shapes and styles.

While we tend to think of architecture in terms of a historic progression—Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque—the evolution was not a straight line from period to period. In every age, churches were built as a response to the way a Christian community expressed itself in worship. That expression has changed over time, and, in response, so has the design of worship spaces.

In our own day, there is sometimes a desire that the design of a church should copy or imitate a style from a former time. Certainly, we have much to learn from a careful study of the past. Yet, with a renewed understanding of the ways we experience Christ’s presence in the liturgy and our own participation in the mysteries, we realize that not every former style supports and encourages our present understanding to the same degree.

Churches are more than meeting rooms in which various activities must be accommodated. They are also symbols of the presence of Christ in the world and a beacon of



12th century stave church, Norway

hope to the world. By their design, they can announce to the world that the living Body of Christ gathers there to remember and celebrate the marvelous works of God.

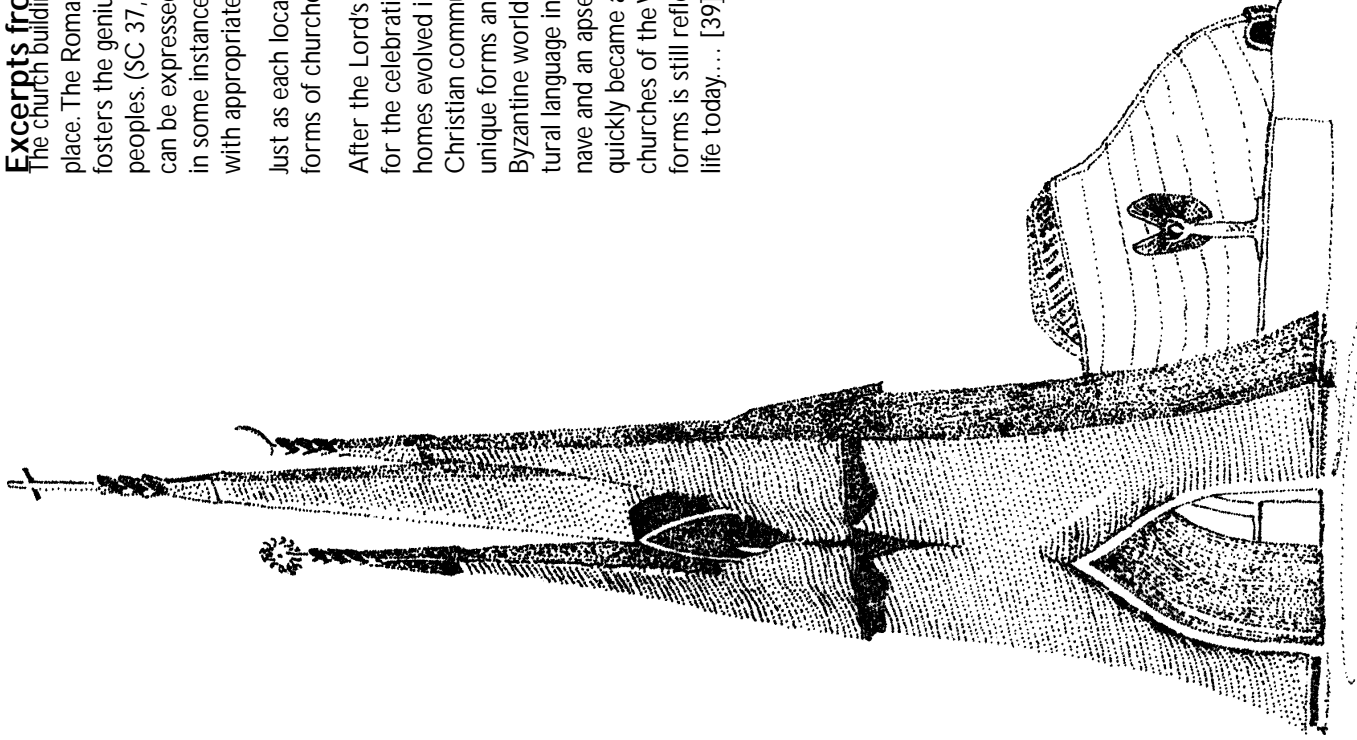
Excerpts from Built of Living Stones
The church building respects the culture of every time and place. The Roman rite respects cultural differences and fosters the genius and talents of the various races and peoples. (SC 37, 119; CCC 1158) This cultural diversity can be expressed in architectural styles, in art forms, and in some instances in the celebration of liturgical rites with appropriate adaptations. [38]

Just as each local community is different, styles and forms of churches will vary. . . .

After the Lord's ascension, believers gathered in homes for the celebration of the "breaking of the bread." Such homes evolved into "house churches" and became the Christian community's earliest places for worship. The unique forms and architecture of the Roman and Byzantine world provided the Church with an architectural language in the form of the basilica. With its long nave and an apse for the bishop and clergy, the basilica quickly became a standard architectural form for churches of the West. The effect of these architectural forms is still reflected in the structure of our liturgical life today. . . . [39]

The rich history of Catholic worship space traces a path through every people and place where the liturgy has been offered. . . . Since the Church is not wedded to a single architectural or artistic form, it seeks to engage the genius of every time and place, to craft the finest praise of God from what is available. (cf SC 123, GIRM 289) The rich dialogue between the Church's liturgy, as a singular expression of divine revelation, and a local culture is an essential ingredient in the evangelization of peoples and the celebration of the Roman Catholic liturgy in a given time and place. . . . [40]

Parishes in the United States today often find their places of worship shared by people of varied languages and ethnic backgrounds and experience vast differences in styles of public worship and personal devotion. What can sustain Christian communities in this challenge of hospitality is the realization that a pluralism of symbolic, artistic, and architectural expression enriches the community. (CCC 1157-1158, cf SC 119) [43]



20th century Catholic church, Paka, Hungary. Architect: Imre Mackovecz

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